

RECALLING THE RIOT COMMISSION: A MIDDLE-CLASS MICROCOSM

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OLD CENTRAL CHURCH

Old Central as it is affectionately known to many San Franciscans, is one of the city's oldest surviving church structures. It predates the 1906 earthquake by over 20 years and elderly members of the church like to repeat that *Old Central* rode out the jolt with the loss of just one tower. Bronze and brass plaques remind visitors that President Harding and other dignitaries spoke there. Today her red stone walls stoutly withstand the ravages of wind, fog and time, and the church remains a vital institution in keeping alive a segment of history, tradition and the Christian faith for countless person from San Francisco and elsewhere.

A 1968 analysis of church records indicates that the congregation includes 22 distinct ethnic and racial groups, as might be expected in a cosmopolitan seaport. However, the general American culture functions as an effective assimilating force. The middle class values of work, education, propriety, and economic prosperity are dominant in San Francisco Central Church. Virtually all, or 99 percent, of the males not attending school are actively employed, or retired from employment. Marriage rates are high; divorce is rare, and for a member to come into conflict with the law is almost unknown. Most families in the church are living in their own homes in middle-class suburbs. Of the children, 58 percent attend private, church-sponsored, parochial schools. The congregation contains many professionals, including physicians, teachers and engineers.

One exception to this middle class pattern is found in a group of Samoans who attend Central Church — a consequence of the migration to the United States of some of the converts to the church's mission program in American Samoa. This close knit group maintains many customs of their island culture such as the Samoan language, colorful clothing and music used exclusively in their homes. It seems paradoxical to members of the larger society to see these muscular Samoan men wearing a toga-like skirt in their homes in the heart of San Francisco. In church, the Samoan men sit together, a bit

apart from the women and children who cluster in the back pews. The Samoans practice the "chief system" of social organization in which one dominant male is acknowledged leader of all Samoans grouped in one social institution such as a church.

As a longtime member of San Francisco Central Church I was witness to the violence and near-riot that occurred there on Easter of 1967. Such spontaneous behavior cannot be predicted or controlled in terms of methodology. One must rely on simple observation buttressed by relevant facts obtained by interview or from documentary sources. This analysis is ex post facto, as was the case with the United States Riot Commission. By seeking to determine first *what happened* and second, *why it happened* the structure of this study is an abbreviation of the format used in the original Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968 1). This example of collective, violent behavior within an institutional context calls for further search for cases of such behavior in middle class and church related groups which are sometimes ignored in concerns with disorders.

WHAT HAPPENED?

The Easter congregation at San Francisco Central Church was swollen by the addition of many visitors, stirred by that rare religious impulse that urges them to attend Easter and Christmas services. They sat in neat family groups: father with a fresh haircut and well-polished shoes; mother in a new Easter hat, and two or three well-scrubbed children. It reminded me of M Reynolds' lyric:

Little boxes, little boxes;
Little boxes made of ticky tacky;
Little boxes, little boxes,
 little boxes all the same.

There's a green one, there's a pink one,
 and a blue one and a yellow one;

And they all look just the same.

And the people in the houses

All go to the university;

And they all get put in boxes;

Little boxes all the same.

And there's doctors, and there's lawyers

 And business executives;

And they're all made of ticky tacky,

 And they all look just the same.

During this Easter service the pastor was conducting a baptism. The scene was beautifully set. The pipe organ filled the church with sacred melodic swells. The Choir in the loft behind the rostrum faced the congregation. Ten deacons sat in a neat row in the front pew. Their task was to collect the offering, assist the orderly exit and dispersal of the congregation and certain duties concerned with baptism.

We were well into the religious service when the unexpected drama began to unfold. Two bearded young men in *hippie* type clothing entered at the main door into the sanctuary and crowded into the back pew. They talked loudly and one carried an open beer can. Since they were behind most of the congregation, most were oblivious to their initial antics. But I had a spectacular ringside seat from my position in the balcony.

As misfortune would have it, the two young men had naïvely wandered into the midst of a family group of a Samoan woman and her children. There was little time for anyone to intervene in the rapidly deteriorating situation at the rear of the church. One hippie youth nonchalantly dropped his arm on the back of the pew around a wide-eyed Samoan teenage girl seated next to him. He was grinning and talking to her as he sought to "make friends." Promptly, the Samoan chief dispatched several of his "warriors" to where their women and children were sitting. It was an uneven match from the start, because most Samoan men are built like major league football players and the hippies were rather gaunt, ready to "make love, not war."

The choir was rendering "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love" when the first blows fell. Seeing the disturbance they continued falteringly, somewhat off-key. The pastor nearly drowned the person being baptized in his startled reaction to the fracas in the back pew. As a beer can rolled part way down the center aisle, I kept saying: "This can't happen here — not in good old Central Church!" But it did happen with apocalyptic suddenness. Somehow the choir kept singing and the religious ritual continued. Surprisingly, in such a large building, 75 percent of the congregation remained unaware of any disturbance.

It was a short and bloody bout, with the

Samoans the clear winners. Quickly, the pastor dispatched his deacons to the fray with instructions to separate the combatants and to restore order, while he continued the religious service. At this point the fight escalated into a near-riot. Why the pastor's instructions were unheeded or misunderstood is the subject of my analysis.

As the deacons' flying wedge shot down the aisle, the choir went into a rousing rendition of "Onward Christian soldiers, marching as to war." Like crusaders wresting holy ground from the infidels, Old Central's normally affable and urbane deacons dragged the yelling hippies out into the foyer. What happened there was reported to me in later interviews. The Samoans evidently began to withdraw from the fight but 20 to 30 other men continued to struggle with the two young hippies in the foyer and stairwell of the church. These churchmen were highly aggressive and were supported actively by several women who emerged from the adjacent "mothers' room" where they were caring for small children too young to attend the service. Evidence and later admissions shows that these members of Central Church were losing self-control. While only a dozen persons were in physical contact with the hippies, others present were shouting encouragement to the punitive attackers, and threats to the helpless hippies. The hippies were severely beaten and ejected from the church doors. A physician's wife later admitted that she hit one of the young men in the head with a folding chair, "Because he swore in the Lord's house."

With the arrival of cooler heads the fight ended and the people calmed down. A search outside for the victims of the attack proved fruitless. When I reported the incident to the police, and asked if any such persons had been treated for injuries, the officer replied: "Don't worry about them. If they show up again, just let me know. We'll take care of them."

WHY DID IT HAPPEN?

The incident of aggressive collective behavior at San Francisco Central Church is best viewed as part and product of subtle and powerful social forces at work in the social environment of the actors, rather than as a unique and unpredictable event containing

both cause and effect in that explosive quarter-hour. Three factors are etiologically relevant: 1) An unstructured situation may lead to normative confusion. 2) Neo-vigilantism remains a viable norm-enforcing alternative in the American West. 3) The Church is a militant institution organized for warfare, both spiritual and temporal.

An unstructured situation may lead to normative confusion. The congregation of Central Church is used to regularity and rigid structure in their religious organization and activities. A complex normative system supports and regulates the structure, leaving little tolerance of digression. Predictable behavior of a conservative and decorous nature is highly valued. Therefore, the *startle effect* of innovation or deviation carries more impact on persons living under such a normative system. Two bearded, roughly dressed youths walking into Old Central's Easter service presented a new and threatening situation where the congregation had no appropriate norms to deal with such a confrontation. Such an undefined situation can facilitate the acting out of tendencies normally held in check, leading to temporary dissolution of customary social norms.

The Durkheim concept of *anomie* describes a social situation in which the rules of conduct are so confused or weakened that they no longer provide effective behavioral guides. Certainly, normative confusion contributed to the deacons' confrontation with the hippies. There was a fundamental difference between the norms of the conflicting groups. Perhaps the hippies were exercising their right to peaceful assembly, and to worship in harmony with their own religious convictions without infringing the rights of others. On the other hand, the churchmen were acting on their right to protect their families and property. Normative behavior for one group was, in the eyes of the other, deviant and potentially disruptive.

It is also likely that there was a confusion of norms within the group of deacons, who were instructed to *restore order*. Some of them interpreted this as a mandate to handle the hippies roughly despite their well-internalized religious ideals to the contrary. Norm confusion could have occurred because the churchmen did not know exactly what was

expected of them in the practical necessity of facing a disturbance. In addition, the question of appropriate behavior was confounded by the fact that some of the church members subscribed to the informal norm that people looking for trouble deserve rough treatment. Such normative confusion and contradiction undoubtedly contributed to the breakdown of order within the church organization, just as normative differences between churchmen and hippies established the basis for the confrontation between the two groups at the start.

Neo-vigilantism remains a viable norm-enforcing alternative in the American West where vigilante committees had been formed to preserve and enforce law and order. In the absence of effective agencies of government, vigilante groups sometimes executed summary justice by hanging their prisoners.

Neo-vigilantism may be distinguished from the older frontier model not only by its urban environment but also ... by its victims. Whereas the old vigilanism sought to chastise horse thieves, counterfeiters, outlaws and bad men, the victims of neovigilantism have been ethnic, racial and religious minorities, union organizers, and political radicals ... frequently supported by prestigious community leaders, often with the tacit support of the police. (Graham, Guerr 1969 103)

The sudden intrusion of the hippie life style into Central Church created abrasive culture conflict, with each side viewing the other through a kind of ethnocentric tunnel vision. The attitude and behavior of the two hippies towards Central Church illustrates their *hang-loose ethic* (Simmons, Winograd 1967 6). Many members of the congregation perceived the presence and behavior of the two hippies as a moral outrage. The Samoan men, the deacons, and certain others, in the absence of any law enforcing agency, felt compelled to take matters into their own hands, and to act out their indignation with a vigilante-type response.

The church is a militant institution, organized and socialized for spiritual and temporal warfare. Social scientists have noted in their theory, that aggressive attitudes and violent behavior are *learned* just like other attitudes and behavior (Etzioni 1970 718). Many kinds of mass media, already linked with the socialization of people are being scrutinized for evidence that war and criminal violence

have been glamorized, glorified, internalized, or emphasized to the point where public sensitivity to violence is weakened, thus increasing our permissiveness and potential for violent behavior. This interpretation of violence in relation to mass media lacks complete consensus among students of human behavior. The Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence did suggest that some children, exposed to violence portrayed in the mass media may imitate aggressive behavior.

In the context of this report, the church too might be added to the list of media suspected of inculcating a propensity to aggression and violence. And the church may have the ability to impute a moral justification for aggression and violence.

In support of these propositions, the anecdotes and experiences depicted in religious literature describe the struggles of the "chosen people" against spiritual and temporal foes. Some religionists consider this as applicable to the comparable struggles and pilgrimages of God's chosen today. The lengthy accounts of warfare, in which whole nations are put to the sword, are also thought to contain important lessons for some modern religious groups.

Content analysis of religious hymns for three denominations indicate that more than 39 percent of the religious hymns contain reference to violence or threat of aggression directed against the church, or performed or threatened by the church. Not only is the imagery of war analogously and liberally applied, but it appears as more than a strictly symbolic kind of aggression. It is thus suggested that in some cases, the religious institution functioning as a socializing agency, may contribute significantly to an attitude among churchmen in which they could perceive a confrontation with hippies as a moral and spiritual struggle between right and wrong.

CONCLUSION

In 1967 the San Francisco hippie was viewed with alarm because his deviance represented an assault on the institutional foundations of the established society. The easily identified hippie had become synonymous with extreme nonconforming behavior. Busloads of tourists were regularly escorted through the Haight-Asbury hippie district. In the polarization of the two communities the stage was set for the kind of collective aggressive behavior (Marx 1970 29; U.S. Riot Commission 1968 5). The same process was at work to create among members of the dominant community a social atmosphere that was hostile to hippies in San Francisco prior to the Easter disturbance in Central Church. The two hippies in Central Church climaxed the socialized expectations which prepared the congregation to perceive them as visible, threatening enemies. The violent reaction constituted a collective defense of the church and its values, in the minds of the assailants.

Middle class people, especially intellectuals ... tend to view bloodshed with horror ... And the same educated people who abhor violence in abstraction frequently approve of using it for one's nation or for some other 'just' cause. (Etzioni 1970 718)

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